

# Dying-and-rising deity

A **dying-and-rising**, **death-rebirth**, or **resurrection deity** is a religious motif in which a god or goddess dies and is resurrected.<sup>[1][2][3][4]</sup> Examples of gods who die and later return to life are most often cited from the religions of the ancient Near East, and traditions influenced by them include Biblical and Greco-Roman mythology and by extension Christianity. The concept of a dying-and-rising god was first proposed in comparative mythology by James Frazer's seminal *The Golden Bough* (1890). Frazer associated the motif with fertility rites surrounding the yearly cycle of vegetation. Frazer cited the examples of Osiris, Tammuz, Adonis and Attis, Dionysus and Jesus.<sup>[5]</sup>

Frazer's interpretation of the category has been critically discussed in 20th-century scholarship,<sup>[6]</sup> to the conclusion that many examples from the world's mythologies included under "dying and rising" should only be considered "dying" but not "rising", and that the genuine dying-and-rising god is a characteristic feature of ancient Near Eastern mythologies and the derived mystery cults of Late Antiquity.<sup>[7]</sup> "Death or departure of the gods" is motif A192 in Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* (1932), while "resurrection of gods" is motif A193.<sup>[8]</sup>

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## Overview

The motif of a dying deity appears within the mythology of diverse cultures – perhaps because attributes of deities were derived from everyday experiences, and the ensuing conflicts often included death.<sup>[9]</sup> <sup>[10]</sup><sup>[11]</sup> These examples range from Baldr in Norse mythology to the feathered serpent Quetzalcoatl in Aztec mythology to the Japanese Izanami.<sup>[10]</sup><sup>[12]</sup><sup>[13]</sup>

The methods of death vary, e.g., in the myth of Baldr (whose account was likely first written down in the 12th century), he is inadvertently killed by his blind brother Höðr who is tricked into shooting a mistletoe-tipped arrow at him, and his body is then set aflame on a ship as it sails out to sea.<sup>[10]</sup><sup>[12]</sup> Baldr does not come back to life because not all living creatures shed tears for him, and his death then leads to the "doom

### Resurrection deity



*The Return of Persephone* by Frederic Leighton (1891).

<b>Description</b>	A dying-and-rising god is born, suffers a death-like experience, and is subsequently reborn.
<b>Proponents</b>	<u>James Frazer</u> , <u>Carl Jung</u> , <u>Tryggve Mettinger</u>
<b>Subject</b>	<u>Mythology</u> <u>Religion</u>



Odin whispering to a dead  
Baldr as he is to be sent out  
to sea

of the gods".<sup>[10][12]</sup>

In contrast, in most variations of his story, Quetzalcoatl (whose account was first written down in the 16th century) is tricked by Tezcatlipoca to over-drink and then burns himself to death out of remorse for his own shameful deeds.<sup>[10][14]</sup> Quetzalcoatl does not resurrect and come back to life as himself, but some versions of his story have a flock of birds flying away from his ashes, and in some variants, Quetzalcoatl sails away on the ocean never to return.<sup>[10][14]</sup>

Hawaiian deities can die and depart the world in a number of ways; e.g., some gods who were killed on Lanai by Lanikuala departed for the skies.<sup>[10]</sup> In contrast, Kaili leaves the world by a canoe which is never

seen again.<sup>[10]</sup> The Japanese god Izanami, on the other hand, dies of a fever and Izanagi goes to Yomi, the land of gloom, to retrieve her, but she has already changed to a deteriorated state and Izanagi will not bring her back, and she pursues Izanagi, but he manages to escape.<sup>[10][13]</sup>

Some gods who die are also seen as either returning or bringing about life in some other form, often associated with the vegetation cycle, or a staple food, in effect taking the form of a vegetation deity.<sup>[10][11]</sup> Examples include Ishtar and Persephone, who die every year.<sup>[9]</sup> The yearly death of Ishtar when she goes underground represents the lack of growth, while her return represents the rebirth of the farming cycle.<sup>[9]</sup> Most scholars hold that although the gods suggested in this motif die, they do not generally return in terms of rising as the same deity, although scholars such as Mettinger contend that in some cases they do.<sup>[10][15]</sup>

## Development of the concept

The term "dying god" is associated with the works of James Frazer,<sup>[4]</sup> Jane Ellen Harrison, and their fellow Cambridge Ritualists.<sup>[16]</sup> At the end of the 19th century, in their *The Golden Bough*<sup>[4]</sup> and *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, Frazer and Harrison argued that all myths are echoes of rituals, and that all rituals have as their primordial purpose the manipulation of natural phenomena.<sup>[4]</sup>

Early in the 20th century, Gerald Massey argued that there are similarities between the Egyptian dying-and-rising god myths and Jesus,<sup>[17]</sup> but Massey's factual errors often render his works nonsensical. For example, Massey stated that the biblical references to Herod the Great were based on the myth of "Herrut" the evil hydra serpent. However, the existence of Herod the Great is well established independently of Christian sources.<sup>[18]</sup> Massey's scholarship has been widely rejected by mainstream academics, including, among many others, Christian Evangelical writers such as Stanley E. Porter.<sup>[19]</sup>

The Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung argued that archetypal processes such as death and resurrection were part of the "trans-personal symbolism" of the collective unconscious, and could be utilized in the task of psychological integration.<sup>[20]</sup> He also proposed that the myths of the pagan gods who symbolically died and resurrected foreshadowed Christ's literal/physical death and resurrection.<sup>[20]</sup> The overall view of Jung regarding religious themes and stories is that they are expressions of events occurring in the unconscious of the individuals – regardless of their historicity.<sup>[21]</sup> From the symbolic perspective, Jung sees dying and rising gods as an archetypal process resonating with the collective unconscious through which the rising



The Osiris-bed, where he  
renews the harvest cycle in  
Egypt

god becomes the greater personality in the Jungian self.<sup>[9]</sup> In Jung's view, a biblical story such as the resurrection of Jesus (which he saw as a case of dying and rising) may be true or not, but that has no relevance to the psychological analysis of the process, and its impact.<sup>[21]</sup>



Bronze figurine of Osiris

The analysis of Osiris permeates the later religious psychology of Carl Jung more than any other element.<sup>[22]</sup> In 1950 Jung wrote that those who partake in the Osiris myth festival and follow the ritual of his death and the scattering of his body to restart the vegetation cycle as a rebirth "experience the permanence and continuity of life which outlasts all changes of form".<sup>[23]</sup> Jung wrote that Osiris provided the key example of the rebirth process in that initially only the Pharaohs "had an Osiris" but later other Egyptians nobles acquired it and eventually it led in the concept of soul for all individuals in Christianity.<sup>[24]</sup> Jung believed that Christianity itself derived its significance from the archetypal relationship between Osiris and Horus versus God the Father and Jesus, his son.<sup>[22]</sup> However, Jung also postulated that the rebirth applied to Osiris (the father), and not Horus, the son.<sup>[22]</sup>

The general applicability of the death and resurrection of Osiris to the dying-and-rising-god analogy has been criticized, on the grounds that it derived from the harvesting rituals that related the rising and receding waters of the Nile river and the farming cycle.<sup>[19][25][26]</sup> The cutting down of barley and wheat was related to the death of Osiris, while the sprouting of shoots was thought to be based on the power of Osiris to resurrect the farmland.<sup>[19][25][27]</sup> In general rebirth analogies based on the vegetation cycle are viewed as the weakest elements in the death-rebirth analogies.<sup>[9]</sup>

In Greek mythology, Dionysus, the son of Zeus, was a horned child who was torn to pieces by Titans who lured him with toys, then boiled and ate him.<sup>[28][29]</sup> Zeus then destroyed the Titans by thunderbolt as a result of their action against Dionysus and from the ashes humans were formed.<sup>[29]</sup> However, Dionysus' grandmother Rhea managed to put some of his pieces back together (principally from his heart that was spared) and brought him back to life.<sup>[28][29]</sup> Scholars such as Barry Powell have suggested Dionysus as an example of resurrection.<sup>[30]</sup>

The oldest known example of the "dying god rising myth" is the Sumerian myth of Inanna's Descent to the Underworld. The Sumerian goddess Inanna travels to the Underworld to see her sister Ereshkigal. While there, she is "struck down" and turns into a corpse. For three days and three nights, Inanna is dead, until she is resurrected with the help of her father, Enki, who sends the two galla to bring her back. The galla serve Inanna food and water and bring her back to life.<sup>[31]</sup>

## Scholarly criticism

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The category "dying-and-rising-god" was debated throughout the 20th century, most modern scholars questioning its ubiquity in the world's mythologies.<sup>[10]</sup> By the end of the 20th century the overall scholarly consensus had emerged against the category, given its limited applicability outside of ancient Near Eastern religions and derived traditions.<sup>[10]</sup> Kurt Rudolph in 1986 argued that the oft-made connection between the mystery religions and the idea of dying and rising divinities is defective. Gerald O'Collins states that surface-level application of analogous symbolism is a case of parallelomania which exaggerates the importance of trifling resemblances, long abandoned by mainstream scholars.<sup>[32]</sup> Against this view, Mettinger (2001) affirms that many of the gods of the mystery religions do indeed die, descend to the underworld, are lamented and retrieved by a woman and restored to life. However, Mettinger also disincludes Christianity from this influence.<sup>[7]</sup>

While the concept of a "dying-and-rising god" has a longer history, it was significantly advocated by Frazer's *Golden Bough* (1906–1914). At first received very favourably, the idea was attacked by Roland de Vaux in 1933, and was the subject of controversial debate over the following decades.<sup>[33]</sup> One of the leading scholars in the deconstruction of Frazer's "dying-and-rising god" category was Jonathan Z. Smith, whose 1969 dissertation discusses Frazer's *Golden Bough*,<sup>[34]</sup> and who in Mircea Eliade's 1987 *Encyclopedia of religion* wrote the "Dying and rising gods" entry, where he dismisses the category as "largely a misnomer based on imaginative reconstructions and exceedingly late or highly ambiguous texts", suggesting a more detailed categorisation into "dying gods" and "disappearing gods", arguing that before Christianity, the two categories were distinct and gods who "died" did not return, and those who returned never truly "died".<sup>[35][36]</sup> Smith gave a more detailed account of his views specifically on the question of parallels to Christianity in *Drudgery Divine* (1990).<sup>[37]</sup> Smith's 1987 article was widely received, and during the 1990s, scholarly consensus seemed to shift towards his rejection of the concept as oversimplified, although it continued to be invoked by scholars writing about ancient Near Eastern mythology.<sup>[38]</sup> Since the 1990s, Smith's scholarly rejection of the category has been widely embraced by Christian apologists wishing to defend the historicity of Jesus, while scholarly defenses of the concept (or its applicability to mystery religion) have been embraced by the new atheism movement wishing to argue the Christ myth theory.<sup>[39]</sup>



Aphrodite and Adonis, c. 410 BC,  
Louvre

Beginning with an overview of the Athenian ritual of growing and withering herb gardens at the Adonis festival, in his book *The Gardens of Adonis* Marcel Detienne suggests that rather than being a stand-in for crops in general (and therefore the cycle of death and rebirth), these herbs (and Adonis) were part of a complex of associations in the Greek mind that centered on spices.<sup>[40]</sup> These associations included seduction, trickery, gourmandizing, and the anxieties of childbirth.<sup>[41]</sup> From his point of view, Adonis's death is only one datum among the many that must be used to analyze the festival, the myth, and the god.<sup>[41][42]</sup>

A main criticism charges the group of analogies with reductionism, insofar as it subsumes a range of disparate myths under a single category and ignores important distinctions. Detienne argues that it risks making Christianity the standard by which all religion is judged, since death and resurrection are more central to Christianity than many other faiths.<sup>[43]</sup> Dag Øistein Endsjø, a scholar of religion, points out how a number of those often defined as dying-and-rising-deities, such as a number of figures in ancient Greek religion, actually died as ordinary mortals, only to become gods of various stature after they were resurrected from the dead. Not dying as gods, they thus defy the definition of "dying-and-rising-gods".<sup>[44]</sup>

Tryggve Mettinger, who supports the category of dying and rising gods, stated in 2001 that there was a scholarly consensus that the category is inappropriate from a historical perspective.<sup>[15]</sup> As of 2009, the *Encyclopedia of Psychology and Religion* summarizes the current scholarly consensus as ambiguous, with some scholars rejecting Frazer's "broad universalist category" preferring to emphasize the differences between the various traditions, while others continue to view the category as applicable.<sup>[9]</sup>

In the 2010s, Paola Corrente conducted an extensive survey of the status of the dying and rising god category. While she agrees that much of Frazer's specific evidence was faulty, she argues that the category as a whole is valid, though she suggests modifications to the specific criteria. Corrente specifically focuses her attention on several Near Eastern and Mesopotamian gods as examples which she argues have been largely ignored, both by Frazer (who would not have had access to most relevant texts) and his more recent critics. These examples include the goddess Inanna in Sumerian texts and Ba'al in Ugaritic texts, whose

myths, Corrente argues, offer concrete examples of death and resurrection. Corrente also utilizes the example of Dionysus, whose connection to the category is more complicated, but have still been largely ignored or mischaracterized by other scholars including Frazer himself in her view.<sup>[45][46]</sup>

## See also

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- Comparative mythology
- Dumuzid
- Mother goddess
- Mytheme
- Ouroboros
- Pandeism
- Resurrection
- Psychology of religion
- Vegetation deity
- Near-death experience

## Notes

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1. Leeming, "Dying god" (2004)
2. Burkert 1979, 99
3. Stookey 2004, 99
4. Miles 2009, 193
5. Frazer, quoted in Mettinger 2001:18, cited after Garry and El-Shamy, p. 19
6. summary in Mettinger (2001:15–39)
7. Garry and El-Shamy (2004:19f.), citing Mettinger (2001:217f.): "The world of ancient Near Eastern religions actually knew a number of deities that may be properly described as dying and rising [... although o]ne should not hypostasize these gods into a specific type ' *the* dying and rising god.'"
8. Thompson's categories A192. Death or departure of the gods and A193. Resurrection of gods. S. Thompson, *Motif-index of folk-literature : a classification of narrative elements in folktales, ballads, myths, fables, medieval romances, exempla, fabliaux, jest-books, and local legends*, Revised and enlarged. edition. Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1955-1958, p. 106.
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15. Mettinger, Tryggve N. D. (2001). *The Riddle of Resurrection: Dying and Rising Gods in the Ancient Near East*. Almqvist & Wiksell, pages 7 and 221
16. Ackerman 2002, 163, lists divine kingship, taboo, and the dying god as "key concepts" of not only Frazer, but Harrison and others of the ritualist school, in contrast to differences among these scholars.
17. Massey, Gerald (1907). *Ancient Egypt, the light of the world* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=t00XAAAAYAAJ&q=Ancient+Egypt:+The+Light+of+the+World>). London: T. Fisher Unwin. pp. 728–914. ISBN 978-1-4588-1251-3.
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22. Alane Sauder-MacGuire, "Osiris and the Egyptian Religion" in the *Encyclopedia of Psychology and Religion* by David A. Leeming, Kathryn Madden and Stanton Marlan (November 6, 2009) ISBN 038771801X Springer, pages 651-653
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43. Detienne 1994; see also Burkert 1987
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